IF I'D STAYED

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A Story of Love, Silence, and Regret
By
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“Some things are never said... until it’s too late.”
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I still remember the first time Strawbys replied to me properly. Before that, we only had small conversations here and there, the kind people usually forget after five minutes, but something about her felt different from the beginning. She had this way of talking that made even normal things feel important. One random conversation turned into another, and then another, until suddenly she became part of my everyday life without me even realizing it. I'd wake up and check if she texted. I'd wait for her replies even when I told myself I wasn't waiting. Whenever something funny happened, she became the first person I wanted to tell. It scared me how fast it happened. I wasn't the type of person who opened up easily, but with her it felt natural. She made silence feel comfortable instead of awkward. Some nights we'd talk until both of us were half asleep, sending tired messages that barely made sense anymore. Other nights we'd talk about real things — fears, family problems, dreams we never told anyone else. She once told me she hated when people pretended to be perfect because nobody actually is. I think that was the moment I realized why I liked her so much. Around her, I didn't feel pressure to act like someone else. I could just be me. Marcus noticed almost immediately. He kept making jokes every time my phone lit up. "Bro is gone," he'd say every time I smiled at a message. I always denied it, but deep down I knew he was right. The problem was fear. Fear ruins so many good things. Every time I thought about telling Strawbys how I felt, my brain convinced me staying silent was safer. What if she only saw me as a friend? What

if telling her changed everything between us? So instead I kept my feelings hidden behind jokes and normal conversations while secretly caring more than I'd ever cared about anyone before. Months passed like that. She became my favorite part of every day without ever fully knowing it. Then life started getting heavier. School stress. Problems at home. Days where everything felt exhausting for no clear reason. There were nights where Strawbys was the only thing making me feel okay. She didn't even realize how much she helped me. Sometimes all she had to do was send one dumb joke and somehow the entire day felt lighter. But people change when life gets busy. Slowly our conversations became less frequent. Not because we stopped caring, but because life pulls people in different directions without warning. One day becomes three days. Three days becomes a week. Eventually you start missing someone while they're still technically there. I hated that feeling. Every time we talked less, I felt panic building in my chest, like I was watching something important slowly slip away and couldn't stop it. One night she admitted she felt distant from everyone lately. I wanted to tell her she could talk to me about anything, that I'd stay no matter what, but instead I just sent some safe reply because I was scared of sounding too emotional. That's the thing I regret most now — not the things I said, but the things I didn't. The conversations I replay in my head always sound different afterward. In my mind I finally tell her the truth. I finally stop pretending I only care a little. But real life doesn't work like that. Real life keeps moving while you hesitate. Then one rainy night everything changed. I saw her post online after

weeks of barely talking, and suddenly every feeling I spent months hiding hit me all at once. I realized I was tired of silence. Tired of fear deciding things for me. So I typed the message I should've sent a long time ago. I told her she mattered to me more than she probably realized. I told her she made bad days easier without even trying. I told her I liked her from the beginning and that no matter what happened next, I didn't want to keep pretending anymore. My hands were shaking when I pressed send. For ten minutes there was no reply. Then twenty. I genuinely thought I ruined everything. But finally her message appeared. "I thought you'd never say it." I stared at those words for what felt like forever. She admitted she'd felt the same way for months but thought I didn't see her that way. All that time both of us were scared of the exact same thing. After that night everything felt different, but in the best way possible. We still joked around and teased each other like before, but now there was honesty between us too. We stopped hiding things. And for the first time in a long time, I stopped feeling like I was running out of time to say what mattered. Because the truth is, life changes fast. People leave. Moments disappear. And sometimes the biggest mistakes happen when you convince yourself there'll always be another chance later. That's why I'm glad I finally told her. Because some people become too important to lose to silence.

After that night, everything felt lighter. Not perfect, not magically easy, just... real. For the first time I didn't have to overthink every message or pretend I didn't care too much. Strawbys knew now, and somehow instead of ruining

everything, it brought us closer. We started talking even more than before. Good morning texts turned into late-night conversations, random jokes turned into deep talks about life, and slowly she became part of my routine in a way that scared me a little. Because when someone starts meaning that much to you, you also start realizing how badly they could hurt you without even trying. One evening she called me while walking home and complained about how cold it was outside. I remember smiling so hard during that call that my cheeks actually hurt. She kept talking about random things — a teacher she hated, music she'd been listening to, some little kid who almost ran into her — and I realized I could listen to her voice for hours without getting bored. At one point she suddenly went quiet. "What?" I asked. "Nothing," she said softly. "I just like talking to you." That sentence stayed in my head for days. We never officially labeled whatever we were. It didn't feel necessary at first. Everyone around us could already tell anyway. Marcus kept making fun of me because apparently I smiled at my phone too much now. But underneath all the happiness, there was still fear hiding somewhere inside me. Fear that something this good wouldn't last. Maybe that's why I started noticing every tiny change. If Strawbys replied slower than usual, I overthought it. If she sounded tired, I wondered if I'd done something wrong. I cared too much now to pretend I was calm. One night we got into our first real argument. It started over something stupid — me disappearing for hours without explaining because things at home were stressful — but it turned into something bigger. She told me she hated feeling ignored. I told her I wasn't

good at talking when things got bad. She said pushing people away only made things worse. I got defensive. She got quiet. And suddenly the conversation that usually felt safe became painful instead. Afterward I stared at our chat for almost an hour wondering if this was how things ended. Not dramatically. Not with screaming. Just two people misunderstanding each other until the distance became too big to fix. But later that night she sent another message. "I don't want us to become strangers over one bad day." That hit me harder than anything else she'd said. Because the truth was I didn't want that either. We talked properly after that. Actually talked. No pretending. No hiding behind jokes. I admitted I was scared sometimes. Scared she'd eventually realize I wasn't worth all the effort. Scared she'd get tired of me. She admitted she was scared too. That was the weird thing about love — both people could care deeply about each other while secretly worrying they cared more than the other person did. After that, things became stronger between us. Not because we stopped having problems, but because we stopped hiding them. Weeks later, Strawbys convinced me to meet her at the park one Saturday evening just before sunset. I remember being nervous for no reason even though we'd talked every day for months. She was sitting on a swing when I arrived, wearing that oversized hoodie she always stole from her older cousin. "You're late," she said immediately. "By two minutes." "Still late." I laughed and sat beside her. For a while we just talked and watched the sky slowly turn orange above us. Then she looked at me with this expression I still can't fully explain. Soft. Nervous. Real. "You know what's

funny?" she asked quietly. "What?" "We almost never told each other any of this." I looked down at the ground for a second before answering. "Yeah. I know." She smiled a little. "That would've been sad." And sitting there beside her while the sun disappeared and the wind moved softly through the trees, I realized something terrifying and beautiful at the same time: some people walk into your life so naturally that you don't notice they're changing you until suddenly you can't imagine your world without them anymore. The air started getting colder after that evening at the park, but somehow everything in my life felt warmer whenever Strawbys was around. We started creating little routines without planning them. She'd send me a message every morning before school, usually something dumb like "survive today please," and every night we'd somehow end up talking longer than we intended to. Even silence with her felt different. Comfortable. Like I didn't need to force conversations just to keep her interested. One Friday night she asked me something that caught me off guard. "What's your biggest fear?" I stared at the screen for a long time before replying. I almost sent a joke to avoid answering properly, but something about her made honesty feel easier than lying. "Losing people," I finally typed. A few seconds passed before her reply came through. "Me too." I don't know why that hit me so hard. Maybe because I understood exactly what she meant. When you care deeply about someone, your brain starts imagining all the ways things could go wrong. You notice how temporary everything is. A person can become part of your everyday life so quickly, and the idea of them disappearing suddenly feels

impossible to survive. Around that time, school started getting stressful again. Exams, pressure from teachers, problems at home — everything piled up at once. Some days I barely had energy for anything. But Strawbys always noticed when something was wrong, even when I tried hiding it. "You're overthinking again," she told me during one late-night call after I'd gone quiet for almost ten minutes. "How do you always know?" "Because you disappear into your own head when you're stressed." I laughed softly. "That sounds unhealthy." "Probably." There was a small silence before she spoke again, quieter this time. "You don't have to handle everything alone, you know." Nobody had ever really said that to me before. Not in a way that actually felt real. I didn't realize how badly I needed to hear it until that moment. As weeks passed, people around us started asking questions. Marcus called us a married couple at least twice a day. Even teachers noticed we were always together somehow. Strawbys pretended to hate the attention, but I could tell it secretly made her happy. One afternoon during lunch, she rested her head against my shoulder while laughing at something Marcus said, and for a second the entire world felt still. I remember thinking, if life could stay like this forever, maybe everything would actually be okay. But life never stays still for long. One evening Strawbys texted me saying she needed to tell me something important. My stomach dropped instantly. That sentence never leads to anything good. We met at the same park where we'd watched the sunset weeks earlier, except this time the sky was grey and heavy with rain. She looked nervous. More nervous than I'd ever seen her before. "My

family might be moving," she said quietly. I genuinely felt my heart sink. "What?" "Not far," she said quickly. "But far enough that things would change." I didn't know what to say. My brain kept rejecting the words like if I stayed silent long enough they'd stop being real. She looked down at her hands. "I didn't know how to tell you." "When?" I finally asked. "Maybe in two months." Two months. Somehow that sounded both far away and terrifyingly close at the same time. That night after I got home, I couldn't sleep at all. Every memory with her kept replaying in my head — the late-night talks, the jokes, the first time she admitted she liked me too. And underneath all those memories was fear again. Fear that life was about to take away the one person who made everything feel easier. The next few weeks became strange. We still laughed and talked like normal, but now every moment felt heavier because we both knew time was running out. One night while we were on call, Strawbys suddenly asked, "If we met later in life instead of now, do you think we still would've found each other?" I smiled sadly. "Yeah," I answered. "I think some people are meant to." She went quiet after that. Then softly, almost like she was scared to say it too loudly, she said, "I hope so." And in that moment I realized something painful — when you truly love someone, even happy moments can hurt a little, because part of you is always scared they won't last forever.The last week before she left felt unreal, like I was watching my own life happen from a distance, because everything normal suddenly started feeling important in a way I couldn't explain—the way she laughed at small jokes, the way she said my name when she was teasing me, even

the quiet moments where she just looked down and thought; it all stuck in my head more than it should have, and I think that's when I started realizing how much someone can mean to you without you fully admitting it. We didn't talk about her moving every second, but it was always there between us, heavy and unspoken, like something sitting in the middle of every conversation. One evening we met at the park again, same swing, same place where things had always felt simple before, but that day nothing felt simple anymore; she kicked the ground softly and said, "I hate goodbyes," and I said, "Me too," and then there was silence, not awkward but full of everything we weren't saying. After a while she told me she wasn't going to disappear from my life and tried to sound strong about it, but I could see she was also scared, and I told her I believed her even though part of me didn't know what would happen after she left. The day she went came too fast, no dramatic movie moment, just a normal morning that didn't feel normal at all, and I stood with her by the car while she adjusted her hoodie sleeves like she didn't know what to do with her hands, and for a moment she looked like she wanted to say something important but instead she just hugged me, short but real, the kind of hug that stays in your body even after it ends, and when she pulled away she smiled that same smile I first saw at the bus stop and said she'd text me, and I said I'd wait, and then she left. At first she did text every day, then every few days, then it slowly became short replies, because life has a way of stretching distance without asking permission, and I kept telling myself nothing was changing, but deep down I could feel it happening. One

night I opened our old messages and realized we weren't talking the same way anymore—no long calls, no random updates, just small fragments of what used to feel constant—and I stared at my phone for a long time until it hit me that losing someone doesn't always happen suddenly, sometimes it happens slowly while you're still pretending everything is okay.After that realization, I started doing something I didn't admit to anyone—I kept checking my phone more than I should have, not because I expected a message every second, but because I was scared of the moment I would stop getting them completely. Every notification made my heart jump, and every silence made it sink a little lower, and I hated how much power a single person could have over my mood without even being there. Strawbys still replied sometimes, and when she did, I acted normal, like nothing had changed, even though I could feel the gap growing in the background of every conversation. She told me about her new school, new people she met, small parts of her day that used to belong to me too in a way, and I would smile at my screen while pretending I didn't feel that weird mix of happiness and emptiness at the same time. One night she sent a voice note instead of text, and just hearing her voice again properly made my chest feel tight in a way I didn't expect; she was talking about something random, laughing a little, saying she missed home but was adjusting, and I played it more times than I should have because it reminded me of how close we used to be. I almost told her everything again that night, almost admitted I missed her more than I was willing to say, but I stopped myself because I didn't want to feel desperate or

like I was asking for something she couldn't give anymore. Days turned into weeks like that, slow and quiet, until even the conversations started feeling careful, like both of us were trying not to break something fragile that was already cracking. Then one evening she replied later than usual and I remember sitting there staring at my phone thinking about how strange it is that someone can become your favorite person and then slowly turn into someone you're afraid of losing contact with. I typed and deleted messages more times than I could count, nothing ever sounding right, nothing ever feeling enough, because how do you explain to someone that they're still important to you when your life with them is no longer the same? That night I didn't send anything deep, just a simple "how are you," and when she replied hours later saying she was tired and busy, I said "okay, rest well," and that was it, but after I put my phone down I just lay there staring at the ceiling realizing that sometimes love doesn't end loudly—it just gets quieter until you can barely recognize it anymore.A few more weeks passed like that, slow and blurry, where nothing dramatic happened but everything still felt different. I started noticing how I was the only one really holding onto the old version of us, the one with long calls, random jokes, and messages that came without thinking. Strawbys wasn't gone, she was just... further, like her life had moved into a place I hadn't fully reached. I kept telling myself that was normal, that people grow and change and get busy, but it didn't stop the small sting I felt every time a conversation ended quicker than I hoped. One day I saw something that made my chest tighten—she posted a picture laughing with new

friends, and for a second I just stared at it, not because I was angry, but because I realized she was building a life there too, one I wasn't fully part of anymore. I didn't know why that hurt so much, because I wanted her to be happy, I really did, but there's a strange feeling when someone who used to be your "everyday" becomes someone you now have to "catch up with." That night I didn't message her for the first time in a while, not because I stopped caring, but because I didn't know how to act like everything was normal anymore. She eventually texted me first the next day asking if I was okay, and I said I was fine even though I wasn't really sure what "fine" meant at that point. We started talking again like nothing had changed, but I could feel myself holding back more, like I was protecting myself without even trying. Then one evening she sent a message that was different from the usual ones. She said she missed how things used to be between us. I remember staring at that sentence for a long time, because it felt like someone finally said out loud what I had been thinking every day but never admitted. I almost asked her what she meant exactly, but I already knew. We both knew. Things had changed, and no amount of pretending could undo that. I told her I missed it too, and that was the most honest thing I had said in a while. After that we tried a little harder again—more calls, longer chats—but it wasn't the same effortless thing anymore. There was always a slight pause, a bit of hesitation, like both of us were afraid of going back only to lose it again. One night during a call she went quiet for a long time, and I thought she had fallen asleep, but then she said softly, "Do you ever think we met at the wrong time?"

That question stayed in my head longer than anything else she had ever asked me. I didn't answer immediately because I didn't know what the right answer was. If I said yes, it meant accepting that timing ruined something important. If I said no, it meant pretending everything was still simple. So I chose honesty instead. I said, "I think we met at the only time we could've." She didn't reply for a while, and then she just said, "Maybe," like she was still trying to understand her own feelings too. After that call ended, I realized something important—some people don't leave your life completely, they just stop fitting into the same space they used to. And that can hurt just as much as losing them entirely, because you're still close enough to remember what you had, but far enough to know you can't go back.After that call, everything between us felt even more careful, like both of us were walking around something fragile that we didn't want to break. We still talked, but the conversations started losing that natural flow we used to have, like we were both trying too hard not to mess it up again. Some days she was warm and normal, sending voice notes and laughing like before, and other days she was quiet for hours, replying late with short messages that left my mind doing too much thinking. I started learning how to read silence in a way I never had to before. I would stare at the screen wondering if I should message first or wait, and then I'd end up doing neither, just stuck in my own head. One evening I asked her if everything was okay, and she said yes, but added that she was just "tired from everything," and I didn't push it because I was scared of becoming another stress in her life instead of a comfort.

That's when I realized something I didn't want to admit—I was starting to feel like I was losing my place in her world. Not suddenly, not dramatically, just slowly, like someone turning down the volume on something that used to be loud and alive. Marcus noticed I wasn't myself again and tried joking about it, but even he stopped pushing when he saw I wasn't really laughing anymore. Nights became the hardest part. I'd lie there thinking about how we used to talk for hours without effort, and now even sending a simple message felt like I was stepping carefully through something I didn't understand anymore. One night she sent me a message saying she had something to tell me, and I felt that same old drop in my stomach I used to get before bad news. She took a while to explain, and in that silence I already started imagining everything I didn't want to hear. Then she said it—she didn't mean to hurt me, but she felt like she was changing, and not just because of distance, but because life there was pulling her into a different rhythm, a different version of herself. She said she still cared about me, but things didn't feel the same on her side anymore. I remember reading that message over and over, trying to find a version of it that hurt less, but it stayed the same no matter how many times I looked at it. I didn't respond right away because I didn't trust myself to say something calm. Eventually I just typed that I understood, even though I didn't fully understand anything at all, and after that there was a long pause in our conversation that felt heavier than any argument we ever had. The days after that were quiet in a different way. Not completely gone, not completely together either, just stuck in between something

I couldn't name. And in that space I kept thinking about how strange it is that someone can go from being your favorite person to someone you're afraid of losing completely, and still not know what label to put on what's left.After that message, I started living in a kind of silence that wasn't fully silence, because Strawbys was still there, but not the way she used to be. We still spoke sometimes, still checked in, still sent small updates about life, but it felt like we were both holding back parts of ourselves without saying it out loud. Every conversation had gaps in it now, like missing pieces we didn't know how to fix. I kept telling myself I should be grateful she still talked to me at all, but that didn't stop the feeling of distance growing slowly in the background. One evening she sent a simple message asking how school was going, and I realized I didn't even know how to answer in a way that felt like me anymore. I said it was fine, normal, busy, and she replied with a small "okay, take care," and that was it, but I stared at that message longer than I should have because it felt like something important had been reduced into something small. I started thinking back to how everything began, how easy it was to talk for hours without planning anything, and how now even a short conversation felt like something we had to maintain instead of something we naturally shared. Marcus tried to bring me back into normal life, inviting me out, talking about random things, but I wasn't really there mentally most of the time. I was stuck replaying old conversations, wondering where exactly things started shifting, even though I knew there wasn't one single moment—it was just time doing what time always does. One night I went through our old chats properly

for the first time in a while, scrolling back to when everything felt lighter, and I noticed something I hadn't seen before. It wasn't just that she had changed, or that I had changed, but that we had both been slowly moving in different directions without realizing it, like two lines that start together but don't stay parallel forever. That realization didn't make it hurt less, but it made it feel more real. Later that week, she asked if we could call, and I agreed even though I was nervous for no clear reason. The call started normal, a bit awkward at first, but then slowly became more familiar again for a short time. We laughed a little, talked about old memories, even joked about things we used to say when we were closer. For a moment, it felt like maybe things weren't completely gone. But then there was a pause, longer than usual, and she said she didn't know how to say what she was feeling without making things worse. My chest tightened because I already knew what kind of conversation this was becoming. She told me she didn't want to lose what we had completely, but she also didn't feel the same intensity anymore, and it was confusing for her because part of her still cared, just not in the same way as before. I listened without interrupting because I didn't trust my voice, and while she spoke I realized something I had been avoiding for a long time—that sometimes people don't stop caring, they just stop feeling the same kind of connection, and no amount of remembering the past can force it to stay unchanged. When the call ended, there wasn't anger or shouting or anything dramatic, just a quiet goodbye that felt heavier than anything else. After that, I didn't message her for days, and she didn't message me

either, and for the first time I understood what real distance feels like—not just physical, but emotional, where someone is still technically in your life but no longer part of your everyday world in the way they used to be.Those days after the call felt strange, like my life had lost something important but the world around me didn't notice. Everything still looked the same—school, home, people talking—but nothing felt the same on my side. I would sit in class and catch myself thinking about Strawbys without meaning to, like my mind refused to accept the change even when reality already had. The worst part wasn't even missing her, it was the quiet confusion of not knowing what we were anymore. Not friends the way we used to be, not strangers either, just something stuck in between that didn't have a name. I stopped checking my phone as much because I didn't want to keep hoping for a message that might never come, but every time it lit up my heart still reacted before my brain could stop it. Marcus noticed again, of course, but this time he didn't joke. He just sat next to me one afternoon and said, "You're thinking about her again, aren't you?" and I didn't even deny it because there was no point. He told me I should either let go or say everything properly one last time, but both options felt impossible in different ways. Letting go felt like erasing something real, and speaking again felt like reopening something already fragile. One night I opened our chat and just stared at the last message for a long time. It wasn't dramatic, just normal words, but it felt like a door that had quietly closed without me realizing it. I typed "hey" and deleted it. Typed again, then stopped. I must have done

that a dozen times before finally putting my phone down and just lying there, feeling stuck between wanting to reach out and knowing I might not get the version of her I remembered anymore. A few days later, something unexpected happened. She messaged first. It was short—just asking how I'd been—but seeing her name pop up again did something to me I can't fully explain. I replied quickly, maybe too quickly, and for a moment the conversation felt almost normal again, like no time had passed. We talked a bit more that night than we had in weeks, catching up on small things, avoiding anything heavy at first. Then she said something that made everything slow down again. She told me she missed how simple things used to feel between us, but she didn't know how to get back to that place without forcing it. I told her I missed it too, and that honesty sat between us like something fragile. There was a long pause before she asked if I ever regretted anything between us. I didn't answer immediately because the truth was complicated. I didn't regret feeling anything, not her, not what we had, but I regretted how much I stayed silent when I should have been clearer, how many moments I let pass thinking there would always be more time. Eventually I told her I didn't regret her, just the timing of everything, and she replied with something simple like "yeah, I understand." After that conversation ended, I didn't feel fixed or healed or anything like that. I just felt different. Like I had finally accepted that some people don't stay in your life in the same form forever, no matter how much they mattered at one point. They become memories, lessons, and sometimes unfinished feelings that you learn to carry instead of solve.

And even though it hurt, I started realizing that maybe that's what growing up actually is—not holding on to everything, but learning what stays in your heart even when life moves on.After that night, I didn't expect anything anymore, not really, but I still found myself hoping in small ways I couldn't control. Like checking my phone without thinking, or rereading old messages when I felt bored or lonely, or remembering her voice in the middle of random moments during the day. It wasn't that I was stuck in the past exactly, it was more like the past had become part of me and didn't know how to leave. Strawbys and I still talked sometimes after that conversation, but it was different now—not painful, not happy, just calm in a way that felt like acceptance. We stopped trying to force what we used to be, and instead started talking like two people who once meant a lot to each other and still respected that fact. One evening she sent me a voice note again, and I almost didn't play it because I was scared it would bring back too much, but I did anyway. Her voice was softer than I remembered, like life had made her a little quieter, and she said she hoped I was doing okay and that she didn't want things between us to feel heavy or bitter. I sat there for a long time after it ended, just holding my phone, realizing that not every story ends with closure or answers. Some just fade into something quieter. I didn't reply immediately, but when I did, I kept it simple. I told her I hoped she was okay too, and that I'd always appreciate what we had, even if it wasn't the same anymore. After sending it, I didn't wait for a response like I used to. I just put my phone down and let the silence sit without fighting it. And for the first time in a

long time, the silence didn't feel like loss—it felt like understanding.

To be Continued....🥀